

Keynote Address, by Leonard S. Marcus

An Art in the Making: The American Picture Book Comes of Age

It's an honor and pleasure to be here at Penn--and here in the city of Philadelphia, with its long and illustrious history as a proving ground and home for children's book authors and artists and their creations. Howard Pyle, who is so often called the "father of American illustration," taught his craft from 1894 at the Drexel Institute, where his students included Frank Schoonover, Jessie Willcox Smith, Elizabeth Shippen Green, and Violet Oakley. A generation later, during the Great Depression, Bernard Waber grew up here, and while training to be a graphic designer at the Philadelphia School of Industrial Art went on sketching expeditions to the Philadelphia Zoo, where he learned to love--and draw--crocodiles like the one who became his best-known picture-book hero, Lyle. Norton Juster studied architecture at Penn in the late 1940s on his way to writing *The Phantom Tollbooth*, an uncategorizable classic that for more than half a century has served young people as a kind of blueprint for thinking freely and keeping faith with their own ideas. Jerry Pinkney was born, raised, and educated in this city, and has returned here often--last summer as the subject of *Witness*, a major retrospective of his work at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Three-time Caldecott Medal winner David Wiesner lives here now. As for collections, the Free Library of Philadelphia is home to picture book art by Beatrix Potter and Robert Lawson, illustrator of *The Story of Ferdinand*. The Rosenbach Museum and Library, even as the lion's share of the Maurice Sendak archive long housed there is being packed up for redeployment to Connecticut, will always have a far from negligible Sendak collection, as well as a Lewis Carroll collection, original art and manuscripts by Sendak inspirations William Blake and Herman Melville, and so much more. To all this is now added two gifts to this university that illuminate the history of children's literature as an art form--collections of drawings, manuscripts, and papers documenting the work of artist and author William Steig and art director and designer Atha Tehon.

When Howard Pyle created the illustrated storybooks that helped make his name--*The Merry Adventures of Robin Hood* (1883), *Otto of the Silver Hand*, (1888), and others--children's book publishing in America looked very different than it did to Atha Tehon and William Steig, or than it does to us today. A century ago, book making for children was a far less well-organized activity than it later became. For the most part, it was a less highly regarded activity as well. In 1900, none of the major publishers employed a full-time editor,

let alone supported a freestanding editorial department, specializing in books for young readers. Instead, books in this category tended, at the higher end of the market, to be generated by the magazine divisions of the larger houses, or by a trade editor who happened to have an author with an interest in dabbling in the genre. It was Howard Pyle's work as a freelance illustrator for *Harper's Weekly* and for *St. Nicholas* magazine that opened the door to him for the books he published at Harper & Brothers and Charles Scribner's Sons respectively. Pyle in turn introduced his foremost student, N. C. Wyeth, to the latter firm, resulting in a relationship that culminated in the Scribner Illustrated Classics gift editions of *Treasure Island*, *The Black Arrow*, and others. Maxfield Parrish and early Pyle student Jessie Willcox Smith were among the other notable magazine artists from this time who occasionally ventured into the picture book realm. Meanwhile, at the lower end of the market, series fiction writer/entrepreneurs like Horatio Alger, Jr., and his anointed successor Edward Stratemeyer so dominated the storybook field that following the death in 1930 of Stratemeyer—*Fortune* magazine gave the mastermind behind the Bobbsey Twins, Hardy Boys, Nancy Drew, and other chart-busting best-sellers a hero's farewell, comparing him worshipfully to Standard Oil founder John D. Rockefeller. For younger children, the biggest show in town was the McLoughlin Brothers, a New York printing company turned publisher of chromolithographed illustrated toy books, board games, and related novelties, many of them graphically as dynamic as the circus posters of the day.

It was while all this was happening, and thanks in no small part to the generosity of another robber baron, Andrew Carnegie, that America's public libraries entered a period of historic expansion. In 1900, librarians as a profession had only recently decided that service to children fell within their purview. As a consequence of this progressive reform-minded commitment on their part, children's librarianship became a new professional specialty and the architects of the new Carnegie libraries made a point of incorporating a Children's Room in their plans. Publishers, in turn, recognized a major new market for children's books in the making. After the First World War—a cultural coming-of-age time fueled by nationalistic pride and 1920s prosperity—the major houses in New York and Boston one by one seized the moment to establish editorial departments dedicated to publishing library-worthy books for young readers. Americans can be justly proud of the fact that these were the first such library Children's Rooms and children's editorial departments to set up shop anywhere in the world, although in the case of the publishers, "department" somewhat

overstates the case. At Macmillan, for instance, Louise Seaman's Department of Books for Boys and Girls consisted of herself, an assistant, and a telephone—with Seaman, who had started at the firm as an advertising copywriter, expected to maintain her output in her original capacity while also fulfilling her new duties as a department director. When Scribner, a laggard in this regard, finally got around to recruiting its first dedicated juveniles editor in the mid-1930s, the company proposed to the new hire that she consider doing her work from home. Eventually, a desk was found for Alice Dalglish, a writer and former progressive schoolteacher, and placed in a corridor. Notwithstanding these modest and at times rocky beginnings, one of the most striking features of the pioneering work that Seaman and her counterparts of the 1920s at Doubleday, Harper, Oxford, Coward-McCann, and elsewhere accomplished, was the high aesthetic standard they brought to bear in every aspect of children's book creation.

Although the relationship of the editors to the librarians was officially one of sellers to buyers, in reality theirs was more like a symbiotic relationship. At times, even “collaboration” was hardly too strong a word to describe their mutually supportive efforts. Many of the first editors were in fact former librarians. Articles in the early issues of the *Horn Book* magazine, launched in 1924 by a core group of librarians and booksellers as the world's first magazine of children's literature criticism, often sound more like cronyism than critical commentary. The two groups did not always maintain a collaboration between equals, however, especially as the most influential librarians, led by The New York Public Library's Anne Carroll Moore, came to view their job as consisting not merely of purchasing books for their collections but also of instructing the publishers about what it was that they ought to be publishing. In any case, the librarians and editors shared the common goal of giving all children, rich or poor, a memorable—even life altering--first experience of literature and art. Taking up Robert Louis Stevenson's exhortation that “only the rarest kind of best” was good enough for children, these idealists, nearly all of them women, equated “best” as much with considerations of manufacture and design and they did with content. Paper, typography, and binding materials all had a part to play in this civilizing effort, which came to be known as the quest for the “book beautiful.” As Buffalo, New York, librarian Margaret Evans would write in the *Horn Book* in 1935: “The story itself of course bears most of the weight. But though the child may notice very little, if at all, the actual typographical details, though the minutiae of printing niceties be utterly lost so far as conscious

appreciation is concerned, still it is not without importance that unconsciously his eye will be trained by good type arrangement and spacing; and the feeling of type well printed on a good paper, encased in decently made covers, will leave its mark." [July 1935, p. 216] The news quietly spread throughout the graphic arts and design community that the children's picture book was an open laboratory for experimentation. Poster designer C. B. Falls and printmaker Wanda Gág were among the first artists whose curiosity about the genre drew them into the field. Their first picture books, *ABC Book* and *Millions of Cats* respectively, were hailed on publication as touchstones, proof positive that American artists were indeed capable of creating illustrated children's books to rival those of their English forerunners and peers.

The first generation of editors did not have departmental book designers or art directors of their own, but rather worked more or less closely with house designers like Evelyn Harter of Random House and her husband, Viking's Milton Glick, or with their firm's production managers, or printers, or simply learned design on their own by trial and error. Doubleday in the 1920s was unique in being headquartered not in a major city but rather in a beautifully landscaped suburban New York campus, where its printing plant was mere steps away from its editorial offices. This arrangement allowed the firm's first juveniles editor, May Masee, to receive an intensive tutorial in color printing, page layout, and other bookmaking essentials from Walter Gillies, the man in charge of the presses. "A picture book," Masee would declare in a classic affirmation of the Book Beautiful aesthetic, "must have beauty, better illustrations, type, [and] paper, but most of all real color." [Minders, 93-94] A former librarian, she had the best eye of her generation, and went on at Doubleday and later at Viking to publish an extraordinary catalogue of picture books by Robert Lawson, Robert McCloskey, James Daugherty, Marjorie Flack, William Pène du Bois, Ludwig Bemelmans, and others, many of which won medals and are still in print. As publisher of Maud and Miska Petersham and Ingri and Edgar Parin d'Aulaire, Masee also did much to usher in the tradition of the husband-wife picture-book collaboration team as well as to introduce an internationalist flavor to picture books at a time when much of the emphasis fell on producing American books for American children.

Mention of two New York based small presses from this time belongs in any discussion of change and collaboration in the art and design of the American picture books. During the early 1930s—which is to say during the worst part of the Great Depression—a designer and

printer named Helen Gentry came East from San Francisco to co-found a small publishing company specializing in children's books, Holiday House. Gentry had learned her craft at the fabled Grabhorn Press, a limited edition, letterpress operation for bibliophiles, where she had dipped a toe into children's book publishing on a modest scale. In New York, she and her partners aimed to make a commercial venture of creating "fine books for children."

Gentry knew that children have sticky fingers. But she also knew that "boys . . . keep their bicycles polished, and girls . . . will not lend their skates to careless friends." She believed that "book-loving children" know a "book worth taking care of" when they see one, and that a story "is made better when read in a book that is good to look at." [Hn Bk, July 1934, p. 213] The company was off to a fine start when two books on its inaugural 1934 list made it onto the American Institute of Graphic Arts' annual list of best books for typographical excellence. Evidence soon mounted however, that Gentry and her colleagues had a lot to learn about their market. Among the first Holiday House titles was a line of "Stocking Book" editions of fairy tales—charming miniature gift volumes that booksellers were unsure how to display and that librarians feared would be too easily stolen.

If Holiday House set Olympian standards of picture book design and production for publishers of the 1930s and 1940s to ponder and perhaps emulate, William R. Scott & Company opened the picture-book genre to radically new approaches to format and illustration, and to new ways of conceiving the relationship of young children to their books. Scott, a small New York firm, was literally coaxed into being by Lucy Sprague Mitchell, the founder of the Bank Street College of Education, for the purpose of seeing her unconventional ideas about books for the youngest ages implemented in the real world. Bill Scott was a wealthy man in search of a meaningful vocation when he enrolled his children in the Bank Street School for Children and met Mitchell for the first time. Mitchell introduced him to her best writing student, Margaret Wise Brown. Brown became Scott's first editor and star author.

Bank Street was—and is--an incubator of progressive childhood education theory and practice. One of Lucy Mitchell's own major research areas was language development and what could be learned from its systematic study about appropriateness in books for children of different ages. Her writings on the subject became highly influential—and controversial too, when her findings, based on years of work with children enrolled at the

Bank Street School and elsewhere, turned out, in some fundamental respects, to be at variance with the librarians' and publishers' ideal of the Book Beautiful.

It was not that either Scott or Mitchell objected to beautiful picture books. Far from it: Bill Scott had studied letterpress printing and literature at Yale, and might well have gone the Grabhorn Press career route had Mitchell not recruited him for her cause. Mitchell herself regarded all young children as natural-born artists and believed that their responses to art and story were if anything more intense than those of most adults. The latter conviction gave rise to one of her key contributions to our understanding of the genre's potential. Mitchell, like all her colleagues in the world of progressive education, believed that children learned best when they were allowed to become full collaborators in their own education. Applying this notion to books, she argued that a picture book ought to be written, illustrated, and designed in such a way as to maximize the child's sense of participation in the experience of reading it; that, in effect, a place should be kept open for the child to join in the collaboration. By this standard, the best picture books were those that had, in a sense, been left a little bit unfinished, and were less focused on their impact as icons of truth and beauty than on their raw capacity to inspire creative responses from their readers.

Just how in practice might this work? *Bumble Bugs and Elephants*, written by Margaret Wise Brown and illustrated by Clement Hurd, and published on Scott's 1938 inaugural list, is probably the earliest modern American example of a children's board book. Applying the modernist principle of form following function, cardboard stock was chosen out of deference to two-year-olds' natural tendency to bite and pull at the things about which they were curious. Each page opening revealed a completely new scene, the corresponding text for which was meant to suggest the first line of a story for readers to improvise. Book Beautiful proponents dismissed the strategy as a cop-out, a clever way around the high and worthy challenge of creating real literature for young readers. Progressive educators like Mitchell, on the other hand, hailed it as having finally given children (and their care givers) their turn.

The Noisy Book, by Margaret Wise Brown, illustrated by Leonard Weisgard, engaged children not in a traditional narrative but rather in a playful guessing game about the little hero's powers of hearing while also exhorting them to imitate city street noises as loudly as they wished. Weisgard's stylized, semi-abstract illustrations, which show the influence not only of Constructivism and Cubism but also of educational toy design, exemplified the quest

for a more open-ended style of image-making than that of anecdotal realists like Robert McCloskey and Robert Lawson. Brown's best-known book, *Goodnight Moon*, was designed to be open-ended, non-narrative, and participatory in ways in which everyone here is doubtless familiar.

Mention of changes that have taken place with regard to another kind of participation by children in their books also belongs in this story. For more than half of the century just past—the century in which the American picture book came of age—books in this genre were created almost exclusively by and about white people. Children of color in search of stories about, and images of, young people like themselves were bound to be disappointed. The publishing and library world's embrace of a multicultural vision of American society was slow in getting started and can hardly be called wholehearted or complete even to this day. The story certainly does have its heroes, however; among them is the publisher for whom Atha Tehon designed books for thirty years, Phyllis Fogelman of Dial and later Phyllis Fogelman Books.

In the heady cultural moment that followed America's victory in the First World War, W.E.B. du Bois, founder of the N.A.A.C.P., resolved to make up for the dearth of worthwhile reading material for the young people he affectionately called the "children of the sun." In January 1920, du Bois launched a monthly magazine, *The Brownies' Book*, featuring short stories, poetry, nonfiction, drawings, and photographs, much of it the work of the artists and writers identified with the Harlem Renaissance. The poet Langston Hughes had his first publication in the magazine. It was an ambitious undertaking—but one which America was somehow not yet able or prepared to support. *The Brownies' Book* lasted only two years, at its high point reaching a subscriber base of 5000 households at a time when the population of African-American children stood at approximately 2 million.

After the Second World War, another attempt was made to publish stories that celebrated the heritage and validated the experiences of African-American youngsters. This time a leading figure in the effort was the juveniles editor at Morrow Junior Books, Elisabeth Bevier Hamilton. As a young person, Hamilton had witnessed racial prejudice at close range. Her father had been the dean at Rutgers University when Paul Robeson was admitted there as an undergraduate, then denied student housing on racial grounds. Apparently unable to overrule the university's segregationist policy, Louis Bevier invited Robeson to live with him and his family. As an editor, Hamilton published a series of landmark works focusing on

the issue of race, among them *North Star Shining: A Pictorial History of the American Negro*, by Hildegard Hoyt Swift and illustrated by Lynd Ward, and Dorothy Baruch's *Glass House of Prejudice*, a searing case-history-style narrative probing the causes and consequences of prejudice against Mexican-, Asian-, and African Americans. There was also Jerrold Beim's *Swimming Hole*, a picture-book story about a friendship between two young boys, one black and the other white. These books too, however, came and went, as did the picture books written by Harlem author Ellen Tarry, who had received her first encouragement to write for young audiences from Bank Street's Lucy Sprague Mitchell, and whose photographically illustrated *My Dog Rinty* was published by May Masee at Viking in 1946.

These were some of the first attempts at introducing racial diversity to the American picture book that preceded the well-known breakthroughs of the 1960s led by Ezra Jack Keats' Caldecott Medal winning *The Snowy Day* and John Steptoe's *Stevie* of just a few years later. *Stevie* was by far the more daring of the two books—and doubtless for that very reason the less successful commercially of the two. *The Snowy Day* is a captivating winter idyll, whereas Steptoe's book gave a hard-edged depiction of contemporary urban life by zooming in close on one African-American child's ambivalent feelings toward the foster child his family had taken in—an experience recounted in the child's own rough-hewn street vernacular. Steptoe's publisher was Ursula Nordstrom, the visionary Harper editor also responsible for *Goodnight Moon*, *Harold and the Purple Crayon*, *Harriet the Spy*, and *Where the Wild Things Are*, among other genre-altering books for readers at every age level. During a consequential thirty-year-long career, Nordstrom mentored not only a roster of innovative authors and illustrators but also courageous editors with visions of their own. Among these was Phyllis Fogelman, who served as Nordstrom's managing editor before taking charge of children's books at the Dial Press in the mid-1960s. Fogelman made Dial the single most important imprint for children's books about the African-American experience.

Asked about the source of her commitment to this area of publishing, Fogelman told an interviewer that the cause of racial equality had always interested her, and cited two books that had influenced her in this direction as a white, middle-class young person growing up in New London, Connecticut. "The first," she recalled, "was a history textbook from fourth or fifth grade. I can still quote the following passage from that book: 'While of course slavery was wrong, most slaves were well cared for and were happy.' I remember thinking then,

'That's a lie. It could not be true. Nobody would be happy being owned by another person.' This was the first time it had occurred to me that something I had read in a book might not be true.

"Then, when I was thirteen or fourteen, I read Richard Wright's *Black Boy*." [Hn Bk, March 1999]

A letter from Ursula Nordstrom to John Steptoe from the winter of 1968, written while *Stevie* was still a work in progress, hints at a significant change in the way that children's book departments at the major publishing houses had begun to do their work. Fueled in large part by Great Society federal largesse, these departments enjoyed rapid growth and prosperity during the late 1960s. To keep up with the increased demand from libraries and schools, publishers like Nordstrom expanded both their list and staff. As the skeleton-crew operations of old morphed into larger, far more impressive affairs, children's book publishing became more of a specialist's game. As Nordstrom's letter suggests, Harper Junior Books had just hired its first art director. "I hope," Nordstrom wrote to Steptoe, who incredibly was still a high school student living in Brooklyn, "that one afternoon next week you will come in after school and meet Ladislav [Svatos] and hear some of his ideas." [Dear Genius, p. 250] By the time Phyllis Fogelman went to Dial, it was taken for granted that a department like hers would have a full-time art director on its staff. It was at this same time—during the decade of the 1960s—when both Atha Tehon and William Steig arrived on the children's book scene, albeit via very different paths.

Born in Illinois in 1926, Atha Tehon had come east to Philadelphia as a young woman to study painting at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and art history at Penn. From there, she ventured north to Columbia University for courses in graphic design. Her first major job was at McGraw-Hill, where in 1960 a textbook she designed by Nelson M. Cooke called *Basic Mathematics for Electronics* was selected by the American Institute of Graphic Arts for that year's prestigious fifty best books list. Jeanne Juster, a young McGraw-Hill colleague who went on to have a design career of her own at Harper, recalls Tehon as a "classic designer [and] perfectionist . . . whose work was always "beautiful" and never "overwrought." In an exchange of letters with Juster in 2006, Tehon looked back over her career, which had included a stint as art director of Knopf Children's Books followed by 32 years at Dial. Tehon wrote of the latter period, "Those were exciting times—for instance, when the Dillons won the Caldecott two years in a row, and when Mildred Taylor won the

Newbery. Probably the most important book I worked on is [*The Middle Passage*:] *White Ships/Black Cargo* by Tom Feelings, and the most enjoyable [one] *The Old African* by Julius Lester and Jerry Pinkney." She had also done a great deal of freelance work over the years, much of it for the editor Michael di Capua at Farrar, Straus and Giroux. One of the FSG artists she worked most frequently with was William Steig.

Bill Steig, as everyone called him, had what can only be described as a fabled creative life, and he was just the artist to write and illustrate that fable. In a career that spanned seven decades, he produced a vast body of graphics and writings, very little of it overtly autobiographical but much of it obliquely so in the sense that, more than some artists, he seemed, like the doughty hero of *The Zabajaba Jungle*, to be always turned defiantly inward on himself, with the art he made serving him as sign posts along a far-flung and often treacherous interior journey.

Steig was born in 1907 and grew up in the Bronx, and never lost the thick, kick-the-can accent, coiled-spring delivery, and street-wise swagger of his hardscrabble beginnings. His Polish-Jewish immigrant parents were confirmed Socialists and amateur painters, and his father was a spellbinding storyteller as well. In a delightful reversal of the older generation's usual horror at the thought of a son or daughter's opting for the artist's precarious life, his parents urged him to draw or write or paint for a living: better that by far, they said, than to exploit others as an employer, or to be exploited as a cog in somebody else's wheel. Under pressure to help pay the family's bills during the Great Depression, Steig began publishing his first drawings in *The New Yorker* while still in his early twenties. In all, he contributed 117 covers and over 2600 drawings to the magazine. He came to the picture book famously late, as a man of sixty with children from more than one marriage, and alimony to pay, and the advertising work he had been doing to supplement his magazine income not sitting all that well with him morally. "It felt unclean," he told me in the interview at his Boston apartment in July of 1994 that was the occasion for our first meeting.

Steig was a man of extreme responses to life, a fact that should surprise no one who has read his Caldecott Medal winning picture book *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*, in which an innocent young donkey happens on to an unlikely source of magical power which, before his adventures are done, exposes him to white-sheet terror, existential dread, the most radical form of loneliness imaginable and--on the more positive side of the ledger--the pure bliss of being granted a second chance at life and of basking in the unconditional love of

one's parents. All this in 32 pages! Steig was forever testing his own limits, and weighing the options open to him. We had begun our interview in the late morning, with Jeanne Steig also taking part and adroitly providing just the right occasional prompt to Bill's spotty memory. At a certain point we decided to break for lunch, and as Bill unpacked the deli delivery order, he paused to consider the plastic forks that had come in the bag, trying them this way and that in his hands, as though to investigate their sculptural possibilities. The next thing I knew he was waving a pickle in the air in one hand, and a fork in the other, in a kind of scales-of-justice gesture, and looking across to me as he asked in a deadpan--or was he really serious; it was impossible to be sure--voice: "Which is better? This pickle or this fork?" It felt like a trick question, an impossible "Lady or the Tiger" dilemma, so I decided to wait for him to answer his own question. It was the fork, of course, which I think he saw at that moment as a symbol from everyday life of honest, unpretentious good design, which—in contrast to that hopelessly soggy pickle—had something of value to offer the world. What an unlikely—or rather cartoonish—way to make the point. During our interview, he said that he made Sylvester a donkey because donkeys were working-class animals who earned their keep honestly, by the sweat of their brow, and who, in contrast to prancing and preening horses, never seemed too full of themselves.

Earlier, I had asked him if the poetry and art of William Blake had special appeal for him. This too had elicited an intense reaction. "How did I know that?" he wanted to know, sounding genuinely surprised. He had *always* loved Blake, he said, and had bought his books even in the days when he had no money. I said that I had noticed a sort of *Songs of Innocence & Experience* split running through all his picture books, in which terrible things randomly happened to guileless pigs and dogs and donkeys against a backdrop of heart-stoppingly radiant natural beauty. Blake, or a vision as capacious and ambiguity-riddled as Blake's, seemed to underlie the magic and mystery of his far-fetched tales. Who else besides Maurice Sendak had created picture books in which the emotional stakes were so high, and in which comedy and tragedy mingled so freely with one another as to become two sides of the same story.

I think that William Steig drew with one of the most expressive lines of any illustrator. A Steig line quavers and bears down a little heavily on the page, as though in sympathy with the inescapable burden of human imperfection. The human comedy was his great theme, every bit as much in his children's books as it was in his *New Yorker* cartoons, which in the

later years were not so much gags as observations—whether wistful, barbed, or both. On the day we met, Bill, then a man in his late eighties, was boyishly dressed in a plaid shirt, jeans, and high-tops. The moment he began to talk, I realized what a perfect match his line was for that earthy Bronx accent of his childhood. Steig had clearly kept a channel open to his earliest felt experiences. No wonder he wrote so well for children—in stories that combined the strangeness and clarity of fairy tales with the teasing outsider wit of the *Two Thousand Year Old Man*.

Bill did not like to analyze his work, or to talk about how he did it, and it was only after I happened to say the magic words--“William Blake”--and that Bill noticed I was left-handed, that he—somewhat capriciously, I thought--opened up just a bit to me on these topics. It was then that I learned that drawing for him in its purest, most rewarding form was a kind of performance art. His favorite method of drawing, he said, was to make a random mark on the page, and then to extend the mark into a line and see where that line might take him. Drawing in this improvisatory manner doubtless had something to do with the influence of jazz, an art form that intrigued him, but it certainly owed a great deal to the thinking and mentorship of the renegade American psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich, who he knew, had seen as a patient for a time, and seemed to venerate as a god. Steig was convinced that wherever else a seemingly random line might take him, it was bound to lead him deeper into himself. What started in chance was destined to end in revelation.

Anybody can see, though, the difficulty inherent in such an approach to drawing—the graphics equivalent of the Surrealists’ delirious deep-sea dive into automatic writing—for a children’s picture book artist. The problem resides in the sequential nature of the picture book as a narrative art form. Not all picture books tell a story of course, not most ABC books for example. But for any picture book that does have a narrative structure, a high degree of visual continuity from page to page is a basic requirement. If the girl pictured on page two is wearing a red hood, the hood most likely must still be red on page 32 and the girl herself still be a child of a certain age. Continuity requires the exact opposite of the spontaneity, and all-out embrace of chance, which for Steig was a kind of ultimate good in drawing. For this reason, book illustration was for him a somewhat tedious and disagreeable activity. It was for this reason, too, among others, that Atha Tehon had so much to offer him. In a letter to his Farrar, Straus editor Michael di Capua that is currently on view in the “School of Atha” exhibition here, Steig comments on the upcoming design phase of his picture book *Tiffky*

Doofky. Having submitted multiple cover sketches, he notes that he prepared the options only in rough form, on the assumption that Atha “of course [will] know what kind of lettering to use, how it should be colored, etc.”

Book design is a hard thing to talk about because, at least as it was practiced by a designer like Atha Tehon, its power derives from the cumulative impact of a myriad of infinitesimally small, finely calibrated discriminations. The designer’s work influences, and perhaps even shapes, the reader’s experience of a book in somewhat the same way that the background music or lighting in a film subtly alters and inflects the movie goer’s experience. Subtlety and precision were both Atha Tehon hallmarks. Maurice Sendak said once that she “took three times as long as any other designer to place a single decorative “A” on the page, but that, when she did it, it was perfect.” [Rosemary Wells email] Sendak protégé Richard Egielski worked with Tehon on several books. According to him, “Some at FSG warmly called her ‘Ms. 1/16th Of An Inch’. That was how tight her layouts were. She wouldn’t round it off to the nearly eighth.” James Marshall once remarked that her taste was “so exquisite that she thought beige was too loud!” Viking art director Denise Cronin, who apprenticed under Tehon at the Dial Press from 1975 to 1981, recalls her telling an illustrator who had come in to present sample sketches for a work in progress, “The color is a little too splendid.” Her quiet, unassuming manner and lack of ego involvement in the invasive sense allowed her to make such remarks—and to persuade more than one artist of the need to go back to the drawing board.

Design is about pure possibility, about choosing from among the infinite ways that an illustration might be framed or positioned on the page. It is about the whole spectrum of color options and the countless type fonts in which an author’s words might be set. “When in Doubt Use Baskerville” is the title of an essay Tehon contributed in 1973 to the Children’s Book Council’s quarterly publication, *The Calendar*. The title refers approvingly to a classically elegant, highly readable font by way of making the point that tried-and-true choices in design are generally preferable flashy, novelty ones. Tehon went on to observe that an effective type design is one that “satisf[ies] three basic requirements: the aesthetics, the practical aspects, and the cultural connotations involved.” She wrote these words about two years after having designed Muriel and Tom Feelings’ *Moja Means One: Swahili Counting Book*, a 1972 Caldecott Honor winner, and one of the first of many Dial projects to depart from the traditional melting pot mode of downplaying cultural diversity, and instead to

embrace diversity, in part via a commitment to rigorous cultural authenticity. Freelancing for Farrar, Straus and Giroux a year earlier, Tehon had designed a new picture book interpretation of *Snow-White and the Seven Dwarfs*, with a text translated from the German of the Brothers Grimm by Randall Jarrell and illustrations by Nancy Ekholm Burkert. This astonishingly beautiful picture book, also a Caldecott Honor winner, was no less concerned with questions of authenticity than the one set in Africa, steeped as the illustrator herself was in the medieval European folklore tradition that the Grimms had helped rescue from oblivion a century and a half earlier.

It has meant a lot to me personally to learn in the run-up to this gathering that Atha Tehon was among the principals responsible for making *Snow-White* the memorable book that it is. During the early 1970s, as a graduate student enrolled in the University of Iowa's Writers Workshop in poetry, I happened to come across a copy, shelved face-out in an Iowa City bookstore. A year or two earlier, I had written my senior history thesis at Yale on early nineteenth-century American children's literature but had not planned to pursue my research any further—certainly not as a career. Even so, I bought the book and brought it home, having had the thought, if only subliminally at the time, that it was puzzling that illustration art as fine as Nancy Burkert's seemed never to be exhibited at art museums. I filed this thought away but found myself returning to it a few years later, once I had decided that children's literature was a subject I very much wanted to write more about, and that one of the questions that most interested me about the genre was why our culture placed such a marginal value on books that I thought clearly offered so much aesthetically, including to readers like me. I had, in effect, discovered for myself the Book Beautiful tradition of the American picture book as it had continued to grow and flourish on into the post-war Baby Boom years and beyond, engaging the involvement of artists of William Steig and Maurice Sendak's stature along the way. As I later learned, other people, in the US and elsewhere, had been asking the same question, at more or less the same time. The Zeitgeist had been doing its wizard work. Looking back, it was certainly Burkert's illustration art, and Atha Tehon's design alchemy, that had set me on my own merry way as a picture book person. Thirty years after that memorable bookshop encounter, I had what felt like the surreal pleasure of telling this story to Nancy Burkert herself at the opening in 2003 of the Eric Carle Museum's retrospective of her work in illustration. Looking ahead, it is to be hoped that future exhibitions will give due attention to the designer's role as well as the

illustrator's, so that the real work of book creation can be appreciated in the fullest possible way. By making Atha Tehon's papers available to curators and researchers here at Penn, the chances of this happening have just increased dramatically.

Atha Tehon worked with many artists on a broad range of books. To consider only picture books, she designed Rosemary Wells' landmark Max and Ruby board books, for instance, which, building on fledging experiments from earlier generations including Margaret Wise Brown's *Bumble Bugs and Elephants*, established our contemporary model for first books for babies and toddlers. She designed Maurice Sendak's *Outside Over There* and *Dear Mili*; Harve and Margot Zemach's *A Penny a Look*; Leo and Diane Dillon's Caldecott Medal winning *Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears* and *Ashanti to Zulu*; as well as books illustrated by James Marshall, Susan Jeffers, Steven Kellogg, Bert Kitchen, Richard Egelski, and a very long list of others.

Among the illustrators she worked most often with over the years was Jerry Pinkney. The stats are impressive: she designed 23 books illustrated by him as well as the covers for several more. When I asked Jerry, who has the special vantage point of having trained and worked as a designer as well, what defined Atha Tehon's aesthetic, he spoke first of the "concreteness" of her approach, her "great respect" for the contributions of the author and illustrator, and her extreme reluctance to allow her personality to get "out front." Atha, he said, always started from basic principles like that of seeing a page layout in terms of a grid, but she also knew when, in a given circumstance, to depart from principle. Her mantra, he recalls, was, "You know, there's a gutter"—a gentle reminder to take into account the narrow vertical strip of real estate that disappears into the binding whenever an illustration bridges across between the left- and right-hand pages of a spread. It was the art director's equivalent of a worried mother in winter's "Don't forget to pack a sweater."

I was curious, of course, about why Tehon had singled out *The Old African* as the project she said had given her the most pleasure. Jerry suggested that one reason for this might have been that she had taken on the assignment in retirement, which meant that she had had more than the usual amount of time to play around with all the possibilities she thought worth considering with regard, for instance, to the color of the book's end papers. Most people give little if any thought to the end papers of the books they hold in hand, so I asked Jerry what might have been her line of reasoning for ultimately deciding on a solid color that I will call—inaccurately I am sure--midnight blue. As we talked about this, I noticed

that that same shade of blue, or one very close to it, appears in the book's illustrations; that Tehon chose it for the display type in which the words "The Old African" are printed on the title page; and that it is the color of the all-but-imperceptible hair-line border that frames the title and author/illustrator credits on the cover. The more I looked, the more instances of the use of this particular shade of blue I found. That, I realized, was how Atha Tehon brought unity—and life--to the look and feel and experience of a book. Book design was a subtle business, all right. As practiced by Atha Tehon, it was also an art.

--Leonard S. Marcus